



Morning After Pill Free on 'Free EC Day'

Backup Birth Control Now Available Over the Counter -- and Free Today at Planned Parenthood

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Dec. 6, 2006 — - More than 350 Planned Parenthood health centers across the country will offer free emergency contraception (EC) in their communities today.

Clinics will give away the so-called "morning after pill," or Plan B, to both men and women at no cost, while supplies last.

The pill will be available to women and men of all ages, in most locations.

The pill is only approved by the Food and Drug Administration as an over-the-counter medication to women age 18 and older.

Because Planned Parenthood clinics are health centers that are staffed by doctors, women younger than 17 will have free access to the medical examinations and prescriptions they need to legally obtain the pill.

The exams and prescriptions are daily offerings at the clinics.

The morning after pill is meant to be taken within five days of unprotected intercourse to prevent pregnancy from progressing.

It is not intended to be used as a single method of birth control, but as a backup method in case of emergency.

Planned Parenthood, a nonprofit agency that educates people about their sexual health, intends for the day -- "EC day" -- to "increase awareness of this important backup method of contraception," according to a news release.

Most doctors, who might usually prescribe the pill, are excited about EC day.

"Leave it to Planned Parenthood to give it away for free," said Dr. Lauren Streicher, an associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Northwestern University School of Medicine in Chicago.

"What a great way to increase awareness," Streicher said. "Given that 50 percent of the unplanned pregnancies in this country are from failed contraception -- as opposed to no attempt at contraception -- anything that increases the awareness of and availability of emergency contraception is welcome. I hand out prescriptions to every woman that is not on hormonal contraception who I think might be at risk."

Shifting Image for Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood believes that every woman should have this emergency contraceptive on hand as a backup method in case of contraceptive failure.

"Emergency contraception is a safe, effective backup birth control option that every woman should have in her medicine cabinet and know how to use," said Dr. Vanessa Cullins, vice president for medical affairs at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, in a news release.

"Planned Parenthood is committed to educating women and couples about emergency contraception and all their birth control options," Cullins said.

Planned Parenthood is also committed to shifting its image, doctors suggest.

"Planned Parenthood's new focus is woman's health, completely. [The organization is] trying to get away from being seen as an abortion provider," said Jacques Moritz, an OB-GYN at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in New York.

"They want to be a low-cost provider in women's health," she said. "There are millions of women that can't afford to see a doc for health care. Also since EC needs to be used quickly and getting an appointment with a gynecologist can be tough. ... I'm booked until April. ... This move will help."

Studies suggest that, if used effectively, EC lowers the risk of pregnancy when started within five days of intercourse.

The sooner EC is administered, the better it works, so experts say that timely access to the pill is critical.

"Emergency contraception is your second chance to prevent pregnancy if the condom breaks, you miss two or more birth control pills, have been raped, or have unprotected sex," Cullins said. "Every woman deserves every chance to prevent unintended pregnancy."

And today is a day when every woman will have that chance for free.

"This is a red letter day for women," said Rafat Abbasi, an OB-GYN from Washington, D.C.

Women Taking Control

Doctors suggest that EC day, and contraception in general, "is a great opportunity for women to take control of their own fertility," Abbasi said.

Before August, the morning after pill was only available by prescription.

The FDA's decision to allow women older than 18 to get the morning after pill without a prescription was long awaited by many health experts.

Dr. David Archer, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at East Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Va., said at the time of the FDA ruling, "It's about time."

"Instead of prescribing a prescription for Plan B as a 'life preserver' to be kept on hand for emergencies, women will now be able to walk into the pharmacy and request what they need without having to make the extra stop," Archer said.

Today, women can walk into a Planned Parenthood clinic and get the drug for free.

After EC day is over -- or once supplies run out -- women of all ages can continue to get EC at Planned Parenthood health centers, or at the pharmacy, where they can also talk with health-care professionals about their sexual health and birth control needs.

But, they'll have to pay for it.

Although the landmark FDA decision that allows EC to be sold without a prescription to women 18 and older has made the pill more available, that decision hasn't quelled the explosive debate that surrounds it.

Arguments still rage over whether the approved regulations go far enough in giving women access to the pill and whether the pill is contraception or a very early abortion.

Proponents of the idea argued that over-the-counter availability would reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions, and give young women more control over their bodies.

Conservatives have argued in the past that EC might lead to a rise in sexually transmitted diseases and teenage promiscuity. Scientific studies have suggested that EC does not increase teenage promiscuity, and does not increase the prevalence of STDs.

While the arguments rage on, officials from Planned Parenthood hope that EC day will give a lot of young women the chance to play an active role in their sexual health.

Check out a list of Participating Planned Parenthood Affiliates here:

- Planned Parenthood of Alaska

- Planned Parenthood of Alabama
- Planned Parenthood of Pasadena, Calif.
- Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains (Colorado, Missouri, New Mexico, Nevada, and Wyoming)
- Planned Parenthood of Connecticut
- Planned Parenthood of Delaware
- Planned Parenthood of Collier County in Naples, Fla.
- Planned Parenthood of Greater Orlando, Fla.
- Planned Parenthood of Greater Miami, Palm Beach & Treasure Coast, Fla.
- Planned Parenthood of South Palm Beach and Broward County in Florida.
- Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida (Sarasota, Fla.)
- Planned Parenthood of Georgia
- Planned Parenthood of East Central Iowa (Cedar Rapids, Iowa)
- Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa (Des Moines, Iowa)
- Planned Parenthood of Decatur, Ill.
- Planned Parenthood of East Central Illinois (Champaign, Ill.)
- Planned Parenthood Springfield Area (Springfield, Ill.)
- Planned Parenthood of Kansas and mid-Missouri
- Planned Parenthood of Louisville, Ky.
- Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts
- Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont)
- Planned Parenthood Mid-Michigan Alliance (Ann Arbor, Mich.)
- Planned Parenthood of East Central Michigan (Flint, Mich.)
- Planned Parenthood of South Central Michigan (Kalamazoo, Mich.)

- Planned Parenthood of the St. Louis Region (Missouri)
- Tri-Rivers Planned Parenthood (Rolla, Mo.)
- Planned Parenthood of Montana (Billings, Mont.)
- Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina (Chapel Hill, N.C.)
- Planned Parenthood of Central New Jersey (Shrewsbury, N.J.)
- Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan New Jersey (Newark, N.J.)
- Planned Parenthood of Southern New Jersey (Camden, N.J.)
- Planned Parenthood of New Mexico (Albuquerque, N.M.)
- Planned Parenthood Hudson Peconic (Hawthorne, N.Y.)
- Planned Parenthood of Nassau County (Hempstead, N.Y.)
- Planned Parenthood of the Mid-Hudson Valley (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.)
- Planned Parenthood of the Rochester/Syracuse Region in New York
- Planned Parenthood of Western New York **Participating Planned Parenthood Affiliates, Continued...**
- Planned Parenthood of Stark County (Canton, Ohio)
- Planned Parenthood of Central Oklahoma (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma)
- Planned Parenthood of the Columbia/Willamette in Oregon
- Planned Parenthood Association of Bucks County (Warminster, Penn.)
- Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)
- Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota
- Memphis Regional Planned Parenthood (Tennessee)
- Planned Parenthood of Middle and East Tennessee (Nashville, Tenn.)
- Planned Parenthood Houston and Southeast Texas
- Planned Parenthood of Central Texas (Waco, Texas)

- Planned Parenthood of North Texas (Dallas)
- Planned Parenthood of West Texas (Odessa, Texas)
- Planned Parenthood Trust of San Antonio and South Central Texas
- Mt. Baker Planned Parenthood (Bellingham, Wash.)
- Planned Parenthood of Central Washington (Yakima, Wash.)

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